

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 13: Language Learning

Language learning has only a modest relationship to intelligence, but a strong relationship to consistency of effort. Continued daily language study is necessary to move from rudimentary communication to speaking correctly and mastering a full range of expression. Some find the challenge of studying a new language overwhelming, while others slacken their study after reaching a basic comfort zone. Brigham Young University professor Dilworth B. Parkinson stated: "One of the clearest results of language teaching research is that when a student becomes satisfied with what he knows, when he feels he 'knows the language." he almost immediately ceases to make progress. We call this the 'returned-missionary syndrome.'"[142] This syndrome is not restricted to returned missionaries: many missionaries overestimate their own language proficiency and fail to progress after only a few months into the mission. Dr. Parkinson continued: "[Those] who manage to keep in mind how little they know and how much they have still to learn end up being the ones who make the most ultimate progress and find the most joy in the journey. Being reminded of the huge gulf between one's own language abilities, no matter how advanced, and those of a native speaker appears to be a prerequisite for further progress."

When one first arrives in a foreign country, one may feel that he or she knows little and may not understand the people well. For some, there is a temptation to stay in the apartment and study during proselyting hours. It is important to study the language diligently during scheduled study hours. It is also essential to get out of the apartment and work diligently to make new contacts during proselyting hours. There is always time in the "cracks in the day" to enhance study. I would read a pocket dictionary on the bus and listen to language cassettes when preparing meals, showering, or cleaning up. Opportunities for study can be found any time, while opportunities to proselyte and share the gospel are limited to daylight and evening hours. One can learn much about a language by interacting with people that cannot be learned from books, cassettes, or CDs. Missionaries who lose proselyting time to other activities, no matter how well-intentioned, lose the spirit and feel that something is missing in their work. The best feeling in missionary work is to come home after putting in a long day of well-used time, regardless of whether people have rejected you or invited you back, knowing that you did your best.

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Small children learn languages by listening. They learn intonation and pronunciation first, then vocabulary, and grammar last of all, achieving relative fluency before they can even read or write. Most North American schools teach languages by focusing first on grammar, then vocabulary. Pronunciation is learned later, and intonation is learned last if at all. This style of teaching typically leads to a strong accent and limited conversational ability. This style reflects academic needs rather than practical utility. It is easier for instructors who may not have full mastery of the language themselves to assess spelling and grammar than evaluate pronunciation or conversational ability.

Time is much better spent learning vocabulary, phrases, and dialogues from cassettes or CDs recorded by native speakers than from written lists. Learning a word on paper does not give one the ability to pronounce or use it correctly. Hearing the words and repeating them is less mentally taxing than reading from paper and is retained better. One should repeat the words or phrases and compare one's own pronunciation and intonation to that of a native speaker. At first, it may be difficult to hear important differences in pronunciation or intonation. Learning to listen accurately is vital to achieving language mastery. Large numbers of adult speakers of other languages with severe accents demonstrate that it is often difficult to unlearn bad habits of pronunciation or intonation once they become established, and it is much more efficient to learn a language correctly from the beginning with a focus on acquiring proper pronunciation and intonation. Diligent study of the written language is vital, yet this study should occur on top of a foundation of good pronunciation and intonation from listening.

Many missions employ a Speak Your Language (SYL) policy, requiring missionaries to speak the local language among each other when out of the apartment. While such programs can have some positive benefit when appropriately employed, the foreign language discussions by two missionaries who both speak the language badly can reinforce habits of poor pronunciation, improper intonation, and erroneous phrasing that can be difficult to overcome. Jim Rohn stated: "You cannot speak that which you do not know ... You cannot translate that which you do not have. And you cannot give that which you do not possess. To give it and to share it, and for it to be effective, you first need to have it. Good communication starts with good preparation." For languages that are not as simple for English speakers to learn as are Spanish or Portuguese, few missionaries are adequately proficient to effectively mentor each other in language skills. I have often found that college students who live in an immersive environment abroad typically master the local language faster and better than most missionaries. Missionary language learning is best facilitated by a constant focus on listening in an immersive environment, with language cassettes and

CDs in the apartment and consistent attention to careful listening and analysis in conversations with natives. While Book of Mormon recordings are available in few languages, the New Testament is available on cassette or on audio CD in hundreds of languages from firms such as Hosannah: Faith Comes by Hearing[143] and Audio Scriptures International. These audio resources allow missionaries to achieve exceptional scriptural fluency in the mission language.

On-demand multilingual news broadcasts are available online from sources including BBC World Service, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America. Words used most frequently become a part of the user's active vocabulary, while words used less frequently become a part of one's passive vocabulary. News broadcasts generally employ practical, commonly used words that are much more useful than the specialized vocabulary of great literature. Audio news broadcasts present invaluable language learning tools for those who do not have the opportunity to constantly be around native speakers. Additionally, many broadcasts are focused on local events that shed insight into cultural issues. General audience newspapers are similarly useful. For languages such as Russian and Ukrainian with variable syllable stress and stress changes with declension, an orthographic dictionary is an essential companion to a standard dictionary to ensure that one can correctly pronounce the words one reads.

One should keep a dictionary handy and write down all unfamiliar words to look up later. Some missionaries feel that they can understand the "essence" of a conversation without understanding certain words. On closer questioning, I have found that those who make this claim usually did not understand or misunderstood the speaker's meaning. There is no place for bluffing one's way through a conversation. Looking up unfamiliar words goes a long way toward ensuring accurate comprehension and communication.

After the mission, it is much easier to keep up on a language than to re-learn it in later years. "It is always easier to keep up than to catch up." More young elders and sisters are needed who are already fluent in a foreign language, and older couple missionaries who are fluent and have kept up on another language can usually accomplish much more than those who do not speak the language of the country in which they serve.

[142] Parkinson, Dilworth B., "We Have Received, and We Need No More," BYU Devotional, March 2, 2004.
[143] Hosannah: Faith Comes by Hearing, www.hosanna.org.